The Indian Courtesan: Her Lineage, Institutional Persecution and Intersectional Feminism in Vaasanthi's *Breaking Free: A Novel* and Pandey Kapil's *Phoolsunghi*

A

Synopsis

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Overview:

In the world of the modern, educated elite, the word 'courtesan' evokes anxiety and paints a complex socio-economic-political entanglement of their vocation. Though the social signification of courtesan had degraded over the course of time, it is surprising that these figures continue to sway the imagination of the masses and have been a subject of discussion in various domains of national interest. The problematic discourse surrounding the Indian courtesans demands a look at their lineage and the dynamic nature of their representation in the context of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Indian history. Opening new avenues of research within the history of courtesans, the thesis seeks to salvage the necessity of intersectional feminism in understanding the representation of courtesans. Courtesans were powerful and independent. "She appears through the ages in different incarnations, from apsara in divine form to ganika, devadasi, nartaki, kanchani, tawaif and nautch girl." (Neville 1). On observing their way of life in private kothas, it is found to be a celebration of womanhood and their liberation from the rules of the patriarchal world beyond their own walls. The treatment of sex may get a little tricky beyond the walls of Kothas where sexual life was policed and scrutinized by family, law or religion but the courtesans played a major role in reforming the attitudes and mindset towards sex. The avant - garde treatment of sex and sexual intercourse as science in India set the stage for the paintings from the *Kamasutra* (2nd-3rd century CE) and the Ajanta caves. These paintings, acting as a curtain raiser to the world are witness to the prevalent hedonism of the powerful pitted against the sexual and moral practices of the common man in those times. With the changing patterns of society

after the arrival of the British, we study how courtesans lose agency over their bodies and are reduced to utilitarian purposes.

Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), asserted that historical influence and experience shapes culture and forms of aestheticism. This stands undisputed in the study of India's social and cultural history. The courtesans were the icon of performing arts until their banishment during the Raj. With dance and poetry in her blood, her aesthetic pursuits and achievements through the ages speak of a refined person. It is important to recognize and acknowledge their achievements and contribution over the centuries to the preservation of our heritage of classical dance and music. Written by Vaasanthi, the Tamil novel *Vittu Viduthalaiyagi* (2012) translated into English by N. Kalayan Raman as *Breaking Free: A Novel* (2022) is about the Indian hereditary courtesan community in the South referred to as Devadasis. The novel oscillates between two different time zones: the present has been depicted through the character Maya, a young academic who lives in the U.S and the past has been depicted by two young girls- Kasturi and Lakshmi- born into the Devadasi community in the Madras presidency. The novel is an intersection of privilege and oppression. The moral scrutiny, depravity, lack of agency and caste oppression have been brought to the fore. The desperate attempt of colonial masters to erase their history to amass a firm foothold in India has put into the spotlight the oppressive mechanisms at work. The devadasis when studied in contrast to the British memsahibs in the context of intersectional feminism presents a compelling picture of privilege in terms of race and gender. The first Bhojpuri novel to be translated into English by Gautam Choubey is *Phoolsunghi* (2020). Written by Pandey Kapil in 1977, the novel is set between the 1840 and 1930. It is based on the love story of Dhelabai and renowned folk poet Mahendra Misir. Navigating the local cultural sensibility, it explores the abuse of power at the hands of powerful zamindars. While opening the local culture and tradition to a larger audience by inviting us to the world of mujras and mehfils, the lovers

Dhelabai and Mehandra Misir are constantly pulled apart due to circumstances. The novel is an investigation into the theme of marriage and sexuality within the patriarchal system.

Lineage is a chronicle of parentage of a person. Before delving deeper into lineage, let us familiarize ourselves with the cultural phenomenon called courtesan. Courtesans were not solely limited to India. Similar professions in other cultures were known as: Almah (Middle East), Geisha (Japan), Kisaeng (Korea), Yiji (China) and others. The shared aspects of lifestyle with these cultures do not necessarily translate to the uniqueness and their treatment that define Hindu and Muslim cultures. Courtesans have been an integral part of India since the fifth century BCE. The earliest mention we have is of Vasanthsena from Sudraka's play *Mrichchhakatika* (*The Little Clay Cart*). Before the Britishers imposed the colonial collective 'courtesan', the monolith had heterogeneous identities. As stated in Pran Neville's *The Nautch Girls of the Raj* (2009), Lord Brahma created apsaras (female dancers). Of them, the most accomplished celestial dancer, Urvashi, bestowed her dancing prowess on humans. Devadasis were the first to receive a scholarship for dancing. They were a community of female artists. In a ceremony that somewhat looked similar to a marriage ceremony, they dedicated themselves to the worship and service of God. They were held in high regard as music and dance were essential parts of temple service. While performing rituals and taking care of the temple, these women learned and practiced classical Indian artistic traditions such as Bharatnatyam, Mohiniyattam, Kuchipudi, and Odissi. The first known mention of devadasi is Amrapali, declared 'nagarvadhu' by the king during the time of the Buddha. Exceptionally affluent protector of arts, as a few Hindu kings lost their power with the advent of Muslim rule, some devadasis metamorphosed into a tawaif. Though a few continued with the temple tradition, the rest faded into oblivion along with the manners of the court. The Mughal dynasty in the Doab region and the artistic ambience of Lucknow propelled careers related to arts. Tawaif culture remained a North Indian institution in contrast to the Devdasi culture in South and some parts of Deccan and East India. Merging the Persian and Hindustani classic

cultures, the tawaifs danced, sang ghazals, recited shayari while entertaining at mehfils. In line with the Geisha culture of Japan, the main purpose of tawaifs was to entertain guests. Additionally, Ganika was amongst the highest honour accorded to a courtesan. Veshya or rupajiva (those dealing in commercial sex) were ranked below ganikas. Herein, intersectionality appears in recording different experiences of social stigma and privilege between a ganika and a veshya within the same patriarchal system. With the annexation of Oudh in 1856, the devadasis and tawaifs shared the same fate and the colonial rulers amalgamated different aspects of artists into courtesans and later into nautch-girls. Their fall from grace pushed the majority into prostitution and some migrated to the Indian Film Industry, Bollywood.

The lineage of courtesans is obscure as how one chose the courtesan profession is vastly unknown. Moreover, abandonment, low caste, poverty and deceit have been widely accepted as motives in certain narratives behind entering the kothas (not funded by courts but only the nobility) or royal courts. For the kings and nobility, tawaifs were a prize, showpiece and a matter of social prestige for being their sole patron. Courtesans held social and cultural significance as opposed to the stereotypical image of being loose and promiscuous. Granting sexual favours to their patrons was merely a minuscule part compared to the culturally significant role they played. Though subjected to the male gaze, they still had sexual agency and control over their bodies. Section six of *Kamasutra* is devoted to courtesans and it lists sixty-four arts that courtesans had to be proficient in. Respected by the learned and welcomed in the assemblage of men, they were informed about all social, political and economic affairs of the state. In contrast to high caste women, they possessed the privilege to learn, not practice purdah, enjoy legal rights of owning property and inheritance and pursue paid professions. Maintaining matrilineal kinship, they had the right to adopt girls in the event of the absence of an heir. A courtesan's blessings even in absentia were considered auspicious in important ceremonies. Resisting traditional gender norms that were prevalent for the upper-

caste women, they were able to carve a space for themselves. Thus, for many courtesans' lineage began when married into nobility or favoured by the patron out of wedlock. Before becoming a courtesan, Moran Sarkar was born into a Muslim family. She later married Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Wazeeran, daughter of the courtesan, Bibi Jan was frequented by the Last Nawab of Lucknow, Wajid Ali Shah. Begum Hazrat Mahal was sold by her parents before choosing the profession of a courtesan. For some courtesans, lineage began only when the profession became a thing of the past. With the decline of Nawabs, Zohrabai Agrewali and Gauhar Jan marked the dying phase of a courtesan. They both became noted singers for the Gramophone Company of India.

Intersectionality is an analytical frame of reference for us to understand how multi-layered a person's social and political identity is. It studies discrimination and privilege as well as advantages and disadvantages countered in institutions when gender, lineage, status, sexuality, religion, countenance etc are at play. The aforementioned factors can be a matter of privilege for one and discrimination for another. The term 'intersectionality' was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989. She emphasizes how these factors interlock and affect the marginalised. The term gained prominence in the 1990s when it was argued that mainstream feminist movement focused only on the experience of white, middle-class women while neglecting non-white experiences. The key is to combat white feminism and incorporating wider experiences for more inclusive fight for gender equality. Tracing the lineage is complex and obscure. Erased, silenced and marginalised in their dying years but subjected to the male gaze and moral scrutiny throughout history, their gradual eclipse demands a re-examination of various mechanisms that played an unpleasant part. Their history needs to be retold through a more inclusive framework that does justice to their cultural significance and contribution. The novels under study are a peep into a lost world that has still held the fascination of the audience. The intersectional nature of the study presents an outlet to register their experience in the wider narrative. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of their

representation is a study of lust, exploitation and deceit at the hands of the powerful.

State of Art:

Spanning centuries, the rich heritage of courtesans in India takes us to the studded durbars of K. Asif's *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960). The majestic courtly entertainment presided over by highly skilled courtesans had the courtiers enamoured with their singing, dancing and poetry. Historically, in the pre-Mughal era, the devadasis performed in the precincts of Hindu temples. The performances were mainly for religious reasons. During the Mughal era and the East India Company, dance for entertainment rose into prominence and thus the nautch girls came into the picture. But there is not much similarity between devadasis and nautch girls.

A courtesan can become a nautch girl, but a nautch girl can't become a courtesan. Courtesans were confined to imperial courts later to kothas, whereas nautch girls often travelled to different places with the troops. Tawaifs, the Awadhi term for versatile courtesans played a significant role in the cultural and sometimes the political lives of monarchs (Begum Hazrat Mahal played an important role in the Indian rebellion). The authority on etiquette who were purveyors of high fashion excelled in the Urdu literary tradition. The 16th century Lucknow was a fertile ground for young girls to train in performing arts (Kathak and Hindustani Classical music) and literature (ghazal and thumri). The young nawabs were sent to them inculcate good taste, tehzeeb and tameez.

Devdas (1917) by Bengali writer Sarat Chandra Chatterjee is considered to be the most popular adaption. The recent translation of the novel *Phoolsunghi* by Pandey Kapil also depicts the desire of men overflowing towards the wholesome figure as they flock to the kothas. The protagonists of both novels- Devdas and Mahendar Misir- fall in love with courtesans (Chandramukhi and Dhelabai). Vaasanthi's *Breaking Free: A Novel* have two girls who later cross each other's path when fate wills to trace their choices: one surrendered while the other catapulted to fame in troubled times. Reminiscing the cultural life of a courtesan

(Saeeda Bai) in the late colonial period is Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993). Mira Nair's screen adaptation of the latter has become the first BBC series to be made without any single British cast. A much deeper look and by no means unrealistic into the world of courtesans is *Umrao Jaan Ada* by Mirza Hadi Ruswa published in 1899.

As the colonial grip tightened, the gradual eclipse of the world of tawaifs began. With the annexation of Oudh, the tawaifs were faced with a lack of employment opportunities. While some were forced into prostitution, some resisted and migrated to other professions. Some high-class courtesans not only contributed to the traditional dance and music forms, but they also played a significant role in the emergence of modern Indian cinema.

The allure of the gramophone industry, Parsi theatre, and the film industry in Bombay pulled them to put their arsenal of skills to use. Bollywood became a fertile ground for Urdu poetry, shairi and perfect thumri. The erstwhile courtesans began acting and paved the way for women in the industry. Jaddanbai, former tawaif and mother of film star Nargis set up her own production house Sangeet Movietone. Fatma Begum, the first woman to direct a Bollywood movie set up her production house too. Her daughter Zubeida became a star in the silent movie *Alam Ara* (1931). Songs composed in the courtyards of tawaifs became a part of Hindi movie film industry. One such composition is a song sung in the praise of Lord Krishna in the movie *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960). Chandramukhi, Umarao, Pakeezah, Anarkali- the popular tawaifs have established Bollywood actresses by being faithfully represented. Now condemned and ostracised by Victorian moralists, they brought with them a list of innovations that infused class in crass. Sexual freedom in the culture of Lucknow changed the notion of gender and power. Though now we have the bowdlerised version of the heritage in mujras much deviated from the classical format, the indelible communities of tawaifs are eternally etched in the golden murals, chandeliers and inkpots.

Problems to be Investigated:

The invasion of India by Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC marked an extensive interaction between India and what is conventionally understood as the West. This continuous flow of interaction came at the cost of multitude political, economic and social consequences. Another monumental shift in power and hegemony came with the arrival of Muslims in the tenth century to the arrival of French, Dutch, Portuguese. Each of these interactions infused the subcontinent with multiple cultural entities before the establishment and growth of the East India Company. Thus, the South Asian subcontinent has been no stranger to foreign presence and imperialism. In such hybrid spaces, the cultural entities transcended traditionally defined borders and binaries more often than not by setting up their own hybrid socio- cultural spaces. A closer look is required to historically study these interactions in the context of Indian tradition of the Devadasi system, later tawaifs and their transition to the monolithic nautch girls.

Preservation of the culture of dance and music through the courtesans and their respective degradation is to be studied through Pandey Kapil's *Phoolsunghi* and Vaasanthi's *Breaking Free: A Novel*. The courtesans were affluent and powerful but they were subjected to the stigma of being 'fallen' women in the public gaze. Accessible to all, the stigma deepened to criminalisation resulting in the dismantling of their art. Therein, through the study of lineage, efforts are made for fresh reassessment. How does one become a courtesan? What are the socio-economic forces working behind this choice of profession? How did the imperial entanglements portray the Nautch girls on the British canvas? With intersectionality, we will assess how the differences in experiences between the various categories of women in performing arts, commercial sex-worker, the memsahibs and upper-caste women interlock to highlight different factors of discrimination and benefit based on the difference in identities. The aim of this approach is to study and practice feminism through a broader and more inclusive lens.

Aims and Objectives:

I. To trace the lineage of courtesans in the context of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial backdrop through their performative history

II. To incorporate post-colonial narrative to study exploitation and deceit at the hands of the powerful.

III. To assess the difference in experiences between the various categories of women in performing arts, commercial sex-workers, the memsahibs and upper-caste women with the application of intersectional feminism.

Hypothesis:

The proposed thesis aims to bring out a holistic picture of Indian courtesans. An integral part of Indian culture; their aesthetic pursuits and achievements in weaving the Indian culture and society needs to be revisited based on historiography. Once the reigning queen of entertainment, the problematic narrative presentation of the nautch girls as either a show girl or a vamp demands a closer look at their obscure and dishonourable lineage. Opening new avenues of research within the history of courtesans, the thesis seeks to salvage the necessity of intersectional feminism in understanding the representation of courtesans.

In our scope of research, we will also recognize and acknowledge the cultural scene and the status of dance and music since it became a necessary element in the institution of performing arts. The vital contribution of courtesans over the centuries in the preservation of our heritage of classical dance and music needs to be paid attention to. A humble attempt is made to rekindle the courtesans of yore. In the course of our research, we shall also include real life instances and accounts with the help of public archives. Nonetheless, we aim to combine history, biography, gender studies, politics, culture and music through the study of characters from Pandey Kapil's *Phoolsunghi* and Vaasanthi's *Breaking Free: A Novel*. Therefore, the study aims to bridge the generational gap by celebrating the invisible history

of tawaifs. Handled with sensitivity, the thesis attempts to combine historical data with facts to tackle ambiguity and prejudiced perception.

Research Methodology:

The present study is academic research that looks into the world of Indian Courtesans based on a reading of the works of Pandey Kapil's *Phoolsunghi* and Vaasanthi's *Breaking Free: A Novel*. In continuing our research, we find it prudent to incorporate the techniques of three methods: the historical, descriptive and analytical methods.

The historical method attempts to trace the lineage and the prevalence of stigma, anxiety and the socio-economic-political entanglement of their vocation in Indian society. Equally important are the use of descriptive and analytical methods. The latter may help us select and analyse the gathered corpus regarding the Indian Courtesans.

The use of descriptive methodology will help to interpret the historical and socio-economic-political-cultural mechanisms at work in forming a narrative during the pre-colonial and colonial times. Special emphasis will be laid on the study of race, class and gender in colonial times.

In order to achieve a comprehensive study of Indian Courtesans, the study intends to analyse lineage, institutional persecution and the need of intersectional feminism against the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial backdrop.

Eventually, the implementation of historical, descriptive and analytical methods will help to understand all the aspects of complexity and entanglements attached to the vocation- courtesan. An in- depth analysis of the selected works will be done. The published works will form the primary sources while details from public archives, biographies, critical commentaries will come under secondary details.

Tools to be Used:

The proposed study shall be undertaken under the Faculty of Humanities, so the tools used are books, journals, magazines, articles, biographies, excerpts from interviews, the Internet, public archives, and such others. Besides Pandey Kapil and Vaasanthi's works, writers and scholars in the concerned field will also be sought. A close reading of each text in critically analysing the complexity shall be appended with similar accounts to offer a well-rounded perspective.

Significance of the Study:

The significance of the study lies in the fact that it is designed to trace the lineage, institutional persecution and intersectionality in the works of Pandey Kapil's *Phoolsunghi* and Vaasanthi's *Breaking Free: A Novel*. These two works are regional, that is, written in Bhojpuri and Tamil before being translated into English. Moreover, *Phoolsunghi* is the first Bhojpuri novel to be translated into English. Not only do these works dare to share space among the mainstream works but they also capture the local colour. The experience is singular in capturing the temper and times of yore. The study attempts to fill the research gap in tracing the lineage. Why were the courtesans deprived of lineage? How does one come to choose the profession? If held in high regard, why are courtesans subjected to prejudice and stigma? In studying from the point of view of institutional persecution during the Raj, how did the courtesans become more recognised as nautch girls while paying lesser attention to their contribution to aesthetics and the Indian freedom struggle? Victorian morality dismantled the heritage that bound the social and cultural milieu of India.

Additionally, while opening new avenues of research, how did the experiences of various categories of women: courtesans, memsahibs, upper caste women and commercial sex-worker coincide and interlock to unearth the privileges and discrimination? In doing so, this

study fulfils the need of intersectional feminism in making the cause of gender equality accessible and more inclusive.

Relevance to the Present- Day Problem and Contribution to Future Knowledge:

The Feminist Movement, since its inception, has expressed its dissatisfaction with women historiography. The problematic discourse surrounding the courtesans demands a closer look at the lack of lineage. There have been studies on their rise and fall, and a cultural space that they have carved in the literary scene. But an investigation into a courtesan's lineage is fairly a new angle given to the entire corpus of study on courtesans till now. Does one choose the profession or does the profession choose them? We will find out in the present study. Therefore, the study of lineage might be of value to bring into the classroom. It may provide an insight to future scholars to look at their invisibility as a matter of concern.

'Shodhganga: a reservoir of Indian theses @ INFLIBNET' has theses by Amrita Singh and I. Priya Uthaiah on *Intersectional Feminism in the Select Works of Baby Kamble, Ismat Chughtai and Rajam Krishnan* and *The Politics of Intersectionality in the Select Novels of Anita Rau Badami and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni* respectively. The use of 'intersectional feminism' and 'intersectionality' as methods of analysis supports the relevance of present study. Intersectionality is relatively newer as compared to the established fields of critical study. This gives us all the more reason to take up this method of analysis to widen its horizon. In carrying out the study on courtesans, the method strives to add a new perspective to the existing knowledge base.

Moreover, Jean D' Cunha's and Meenal Tula's researches on "Indian Contagious Disease Act in the late colonial period" and "precarious control" on "women's desire" weave a complex picture of colonial administration. The present study instead of taking up a period of time in the colonial administration, attempts to present a bird's eye view of the stages of institutional persecution leading to the devaluation of courtesans in social hierarchy. The

study not only analyses the colonial barbarism but the ‘oriental mirage’ of the Orientalists in their inability to fully comprehend the cultural Other.

In studying these aspects, the thesis will justify the viability of the topic that is very much relevant to the present day. By reviewing the lost world, it bridges the generation gap. Moreover, the works selected to carry out the research brings to forefront the relevance of translation in securing a lasting impact in mainstream writing. Additionally, the thesis seeks to go beyond the gender and history of discrimination to bring a broader and more inclusive lens through intersectionality.

Plan of the Work:

The following are the proposed chapters in the thesis:

Chapter I: Introduction

Chapter II: Literature Review

Chapter III: Unveiling a Courtesan's Obscure Lineage through Her Performative History

Chapter IV: A Postcolonial Study of the Stages of Institutional Persecution

Chapter V: Kasturi, Lakshmi and Dhelabai: An Intersectional Feminist Analysis

Chapter VI: Conclusion

Select Bibliography

Chapter I: Introduction

The introduction will provide an overview of all the chapters in brief. Since time immemorial, praises have been heaped on public women performers. The epics depict apsaras in divine forms; historical accounts and literature depict devadasis in the temples, tawaifs in Mughal courts, nautch girls in the Raj and others. The oldest example of our rich heritage is the famous bronze statue of the Dancing Girl excavated from Mohenjo-Daro in present Pakistan. It is the world's oldest bronze sculpture. The paintings of Ajanta caves under the patronage of Vakataka kings were inscribed by Buddhist monks. These paintings feature Dying Princess, Flying Apsara and others. An important feature of the Chola sculpture was the sculpture of Nataraja in the Tandava dance posture.

It will also discuss the lineage of women in the bazaars and the dynamic nature of their representation in the context of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Indian history. Studying in the context of the Tamil novel *Breaking Free: A Novel* and the Bhojpuri novel *Phoolsunghi* in translation, we will explore the heritage and study the loss of culture in colonial times. Dhelabai emulating a spirited bird in *Phoolsunghi* is a famous courtesan from Chappra. An outcast, nonetheless, she fights a gritty battle against the patriarchal society. Similarly, Lakshmi in *Breaking Free: A Novel* can’t put a claim over Periya Mirasu for she is his illegitimate daughter born in the Devadasi clan.

The post-colonial narrative will study exploitation and deceit at the hands of the powerful. The problematic discourse surrounding the courtesans demands a relook at their complex portrayal in the context of historical narratives. Traversing a series of crisis, Dhelabai’s rendition is earnest and resounds in Kasturi from *Breaking Free: A Novel*. Their worlds are turbulent and intertwined.

In retrieving voices from the margin, we will explore subaltern themes by looking back at the forgotten world of courtesans fallen from grace. With intersectionality, we open new

avenues of research by providing an ‘analytical framework’ to study a person’s social and political identity. The multi-layered study of discrimination and privilege by studying women in different professions, races and classes provide an insight into the need for a more inclusive study of gender equality.

Chapter II: Literature Review

“The Institution of Kotha: A Case Study of Tawaif-Centered Films” by Ayesha Afreen published in the *Imperial Journal of Interdisciplinary Research* engages in the debate of social relations and gender identities in their workplace - the kotha. “Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man” (1099). Kotha as a “total institution” (1099) - a term coined by sociologist Erving Goffman - “a place of work and residence” (1099) where a number of people alike in circumstances, cut off from the wider community stay together. In her research, Tawaif-centered Bollywood films are taken as case studies.

“Women of ‘Ill-Repute’: Ethics and Urdu literature in Colonial India” by Sarah Waheed published in *Modern Asian Studies* points to the personification ‘courtesans’ as threat and allure. The magnetism of the courtesans is unmissed. Since women are seen as the bearers of honor, their sexuality becomes a central feature in forming an identity. As a public woman, they became a target of strict moral regulation from the nineteenth century onwards.

“Writing the history of women in the margins: The Courtesans of India” by Rekha Pande published in the *Mizoram University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* focus on the erasure of a category of women who were never a part of mainstream discourse. The selective study of women’s history draws attention to the fact that women unlike men have not their lived experiences recorded.

Pran Neville’s *Nautch Girls of the Raj* (2009) traces the origin of Nautch girl from the Mughal era to the British Raj where their popularity touched a new high. Realizing that the

historians, sociologists, novelists have not always done justice in the depiction of Nautch girls, he tries to bring life vital periods of our recent history of which we have no record.

"Re-Inscribing the Indian Courtesans: A Genealogical Approach" by Meenal Tula and Rekha Pande published in *Journal of International Women's Studies* bring out the partial character of narratives that remain blind to the complexity in bringing out a stable, unproblematic history of courtesan that can be traced back without facing any bumps along the way. It seeks to retrieve suppressed, subaltern pasts and bring them into the fold of mainstream discourse of history.

Saba Dewan's *Tawaifnama* (2019) presents the oral history of courtesans reaching back to three generations. It chronicles the continued stigmatization and discrimination that lasts even today. It throws a light on how the musicians of today use tawaifs contribution without really acknowledging it.

Though works have been done on the invisibility and erasure of courtesans, the gap in consistently aligning their origin and downfall still suffers a lack of attention. It would be interesting to consolidate the scattered references and study taking up sections rather than the whole. Moreover, the aspect of intersectional feminism in emphasizing the difficulty of tawaifs being in the public eye unlike the purdanasheen (within purdah) wives and memsahibs open new avenues of research.

Chapter III: Unveiling a Courtesan's Obscure Lineage through Her Performative History

The aforementioned chapter relives the charismatic, harsh yet touching past of the courtesans with particular reference to Vaasanthi and Pandey Kapil's works. N. Kalyan Raman states in the 'Translator's Note' of *Breaking Free: A Novel* that 'through the device of fiction', the chequered history of the Devadasi community has been dealt with.

This chapter will also do a comparative study of the depiction of courtesans in the works of Premchand, Manto, Nabendu Ghosh and others. The streets of major cities like Calcutta, Banaras, Bombay, and Lucknow bustling with dance and music tells the tale of the glamour of courtesans at the zenith of her talent and charisma during their heydays. The books explore their seductive allure and dazzling grace in the days of their glory. Phoolsunghi or a flowerpecker, is a tiny bird that swarms around flowers. When trapped in a cage, it loses its vivacity fearing decay. Therefore, the metaphor of an effervescent avian fluttering and flapping connotes the courtesan, Dhelabai. Locked away in the Red Mansion at the whim of a senescent Zamindar Haliwant Sahay, she is no longer capable of embracing the world of music. The novel is effusive in its praise for the musical talent of Dhelabai, but her outstanding contribution gets overlooked owing to her tawaif background.

Their popularity and status among the Indian aristocracy and nabobs are etched in the immortal pages of history. Besides being the icon in performing arts, we will study their obscure lineage as portrayed within the historical narrative. Dance and music, according to Indian tradition, are creations that are divine in nature. It said that sage Bharata was mandated by Lord Brahma to compile the *Natya Shastra*; a sacred treatise on dance and music. We will also focus on the personalities who were courtesans that shaped dance, and music in Bollywood- Indian Film Industry.

Chapter IV: A Postcolonial Study of the Stages of Institutional Persecution

Pandey Kapil in the ‘Preface’ to *Phoolsunghi* wrote that the “… plot must not be mistaken for history….” However, the novel is historical, in the sense, that it travels ninety years in colonial administration. The advent of Nabob period in the eighteenth century brought with it cultural interaction between the Indian aristocrats and the East India Company through Nautch parties. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the Nautch became symbolic of India’s despotism and backwardness in the eyes of the British. We will look at how Eastern sexuality posed a threat to British proliferation of power in India: the

representation of Nautch girls as commercial sex workers, increased medical intervention, and dangers of miscegenation amongst others. "…. The revulsion won't fade away for at least two more generations. No one sings or dances now. Such was the stigma we suffered." (Vaasanthi 302). On reading the travails of haunting memory, one is compelled to wonder whether sleuth of legislative reforms put into motion by the Anti-Nautch movement offered any lasting solution to the community in question. We will also study how the British understanding of courtesans justified the imperial project in India. Ostracised, Lakshmi in *Breaking Free: A Novel* defines freedom at two levels- personal and national. Motivated by the Gandhian thought, she is determined to uproot the Devadasi system. Her quest is not only to oust Britishers, but to redeem her fallen sisters along the way.

Chapter V: Kasturi, Lakshmi and Dhelabai: An Intersectional Feminist Analysis

This chapter takes into account intersectional feminism. 'Intersectionality' is a term coined by professor Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 to put forward her view as to how different social hierarchies interact resulting in tensions that have far-reaching consequences. Kimberle has argued that discrimination, especially, against black women is different from general anti-woman discrimination or anti-Black racism. She thinks that Black women receive compounded consequences of racism and sexism. Contemplating women's position in general, different women characters intersect from different points in history. Seamlessly delineated in *Breaking Free: A Novel* - Kasturi, Lakshmi, Thilakam, and Dharini navigate through hatred, agony and trauma hoping to 'break free' from the legacy of shame and marginalised existence. With Dhelabai, we aim to compare and contrast the Tawaif culture of the North with the Devadasi system in the South. This will enable us to study women performers at the intersection of different socio-cultural backgrounds. Taking into account this argument as the background, we have also put together women from different social categories: tawaifs, memsahib and the women of Indian nobility. We will study how these women interact to surface the privileges and discrimination. We intend to go deeper to

understand how multi-layered a person's social and political identity is. Kasturi- one of the protagonists in Vaasanthi's *Breaking Free: A Novel*- is born in the Devadasi clan. In the service of God, she finds dance liberating. On the other hand, her sister Thilakam elopes and marries a reformer. Thinking marriage to be ticket to respectable living, she does not wish to carry "the burden of humiliation" (Vaasanthi 321). Keeping this account in mind, it studies discrimination and privileges countered in institutions where gender, lineage, status, sexuality, religion etc are at play. These factors interlock and affect the marginalised. With intersectionality, we will assess the differences in experience between the various categories of women in performing arts, commercial sex-worker, the memsahibs and upper-caste women. This approach facilitates the study and practice of feminism through a broader and more inclusive lens.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

This chapter will consist the contribution of courtesans in preserving the Indian culture and heritage, and their days of glory and demise with a special reference to Pandey Kapil's *Phoolsunghi* and Vaasanthi's *Breaking Free: A Novel*.

Married women, living cloistered lives, may have had at least some access to reading and writing but other forms of art like dancing, sculpting and painting couldn't survive the claustrophobia. Restless art seeks a restless artist; and the courtesans exemplified all forms of art and discipline in full spirit. Facing double marginalization, encroachment upon her sacred art violates her autonomy. Kasturi's Paati brings out into open that God is not just an idol, but a living, breathing being whom she is to marry. Kasturi upon attaining puberty undergoes the initiation ceremony and wears 'bottu'. "It's a position that everyone born in the clan aspires to…...the gates of heaven will open for you." (Vaasanthi 49) Thinking of herself as the deity's wife, Kasturi is astonished when grabbed by her waist by an Englishman. Such was the public perception of them! "Are you going to melt if he touches you? Why are you acting shy, as if you are a chaste woman?" (Vaasanthi 120). After the thought-provoking study of the

novels, we come to question the sad state of affairs by reading the consequences of Anti-Nautch or Anti-Devadasi agitation in the Madras Presidency. When the nineteenth century came to a close, privileged upper and middle-class reformers upon receiving western education questioned the Devadasi system. The displacement and degradation of the community driven to become a community of prostitutes are taken into account. Inherently immoral, the colonial government regulated gender norms based on the western understanding of morality thus pushing them into the fringes of society. To control venereal diseases in the armed forces, the 'Lock Hospital' system was introduced in the Cantonment towns. To regulate prostitution in towns, 'Indian Contagious Diseases Act' was passed in 1868. The colonial government ordered sex workers to register and undergo compulsory medical examinations. When the law was in place, Devadasis were forced to register as sex workers. In Bombay, the first mention of prostitution laws occurred in 1812. They were cited as sites of disturbances. Therefore, we will draw a conclusion by looking into the criminalization of prostitutes, the emergence of punitive laws against prostitution and the effect of these laws on prostitution.

After the study of lineage, institutional persecution, intersectionality, we will also try to retrace the subaltern, silenced voices of Kasturi and Dhelabai. Representative of their respective region and clan, they provide voice to the voiceless. At the end of the chapter, I shall try to put my own views on the concerned issue.

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